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Reviews

Review of *China Tripping: Encountering the Everyday in the People's Republic*

By Byron Williams

Researching China does not always mean that you have to visit the country, but in order to understand China and its culture in greater depth, visiting and earning personal experiences has a great impact on learning about the country. The China experts featured in *China Tripping* have had a lifelong passion and deep desire to travel to China, live there and conduct research there. These experts have studied China so deeply they have found a natural affinity for it, and for most it is a home away from home.

Weaving together the accounts and extended stays of China experts, mostly from America, these “trippings” can be funny, enlightening, puzzling, and even sad. The varied accounts that comprise *China Tripping* come from academics and journalists who have visited China before and published formal research. Their work over the past four decades has been influential, and has provided a source of encouragement and a path to follow, prompting other scholars to take China trips themselves. Whether this is one’s first or hundredth time visiting China, scholars always encounter something new and unexpected while wandering around the vast country and interacting with all sorts of different people and places. The title phrase, “China tripping” can have several different meanings. The first, and most obvious meaning is, “I recently went on a trip to China.” The other, less obvious meaning is explained in the first chapter: “I was in China

and I was constantly tripping over things that I hadn't seen before or expected." It is very important to note that even experts who have spent their entire lives studying China do not know everything about the daily life, culture, and diversity of China. This is understandable, as no amount of scholarly work on a society can compare with immersion into that society. To drive home this point, *China Tripping* consistently highlights the fact that this unexpected tripping and stumbling leads to big revelations, and is ultimately a learning experience. Furthermore, China scholars through their travels to China have not just witnessed history firsthand; they have been a part of it. In this volume, their personal experiences are featured centrally instead of their research (which is naturally the focus of all of their other writing), fascinating personal accounts that may have otherwise remained unknown.

The first episode in the volume involves a group of American graduate students who visited China in 1971 for the first time. This was before Nixon's 1972 visit, and it was one of the first American delegations to visit China since the Communist Revolution of 1949. In this episode, the author is Paul Pickowicz, a prominent historian of the People's Republic of China. During this visit, Pickowicz had started to hand wash his dirty clothes since he did not want to ask the hotel staff to wash his stinky socks and underwear (what kind of statement would that be for an American capitalist to have his clothes laundered?). But it was hot and humid, and as they traveled, his clothes didn't dry properly after he washed them. He would diligently hand wash his dirty socks and underwear along the way, but nothing would ever dry out, so he traveled with a bag of smelly laundry and he was quickly running out of clean clothes.

When Pickowicz's delegation arrived at their next stop, Xinqiao Hotel, his main goal was to get his laundry taken care of without his friends finding out about it. Among a group of radical young students, it would be too embarrassing if they did. Sneaking off to the fourth floor, at the end of the hall he discovered a room with the door open. He noticed that it was occupied by five or six

young women, whom he thought were hotel staff. He left his bag of dirty clothes, asking them politely in Chinese to wash them and return them to his room. That evening during dinner, one of the minders from the group named Li waved him over, apparently holding his sack of dirty clothes. Wondering why she was holding his clothes, Pickowicz quickly ran over, fearing utter embarrassment. Li asked him if he had left his clothes in a room on the fourth floor, and Pickowicz replied that he had, with a group of hotel staff members. Li proceeded to explain to him that the women were not staff members—they were a delegation of revolutionary fighters from the South Vietnam National Liberation Front!

In another memorable episode among the over fifty vignettes, Morris Rossabi, today a leading expert on Mongolian history, recounts an episode in which he served as a guide to a group of tourists in China in the early 1980s. Rossabi recalls traveling around China, having a pleasant time, until some members of the group noticed that a man within the group had a bad cough that appeared to be worsening. One of the members asked him if he was alright and if he needed to be seen at a clinic or hospital. The gentleman replied that he had the proper medication to take care of his illness. When they reached Shanghai he was in more distress than before. After dinner, the man expressed to Rossabi that he was now ready to go home. Rossabi explained that this was not possible since they were visiting China on a group visa, which meant that once they entered the country together, they would have to leave together. Still, Rossabi was determined to fulfill the man's wish and indeed did so by the end of the day, securing an individual visa for him. The man would take a flight to Shanghai and then to Guangzhou, which would eventually take him directly home.

The next morning after breakfast the assistant director of Shanghai's China Travel Service was at Rossabi's door, telling him to pack his things for Guangzhou to depart to the United States immediately. Rossabi learned that the sick man had not just had a bad cough, but that he had in fact died suddenly at the Guangzhou

airport an hour before his flight's departure. Chinese officials were concerned with the death of a tourist, and did not want to shoulder the blame for his demise. The Travel Service and the Party representative wanted Rossabi to approve of an autopsy, but he said that he would not allow it unless he received clearly stated consent from the family. Trying to reach the family, Rossabi called the man's wife, who was his listed emergency contact and explained the situation, but she had Alzheimer's and did not understand. Rossabi eventually found a new number to call and he reached the dead man's son, who gave his approval for the autopsy. At two o'clock the next morning officials knocked on Rossabi's door, angrily asking him why he had not told the authorities about the radioactive pellets (a treatment for cancer) that were found in the dead man's body. Rossabi realized that the deceased man was so desperate to visit China, that he had concealed his diagnosis of late-stage cancer, and had risked his life to undertake the journey. Rossabi tried to reach the man's son again to explain how he had died, but was unable to. As he was about to board a plane and travel back to the United States he was approached by a China Travel Service representative who handed him an urn with ashes. He delivered the urn right away to the travel agency in Los Angeles so that it could be transmitted to the family.

These lively vignettes by China experts represent, as the book's afterword describes, a "journey of discovery, cultural engagement, and political learning." The two trips noted here have long passed, but the journeys still continue today with experiences that are similar and different, and the volume includes episodes from the 1980s through today. The China scholars in this book seek to understand China better by seeing the country firsthand, but ultimately end up trying to make sense of themselves, their own biases and stumbling efforts, and their own cultures. Although this book does not present itself as a traditional scholarly volume, it ironically offers huge educational value, as it provides first-hand accounts of moments in cultural interaction that have been lost in the historical and collective memory of the post-Mao era. Most striking about these "aha moments" is the recurring theme of

erroneous assumptions and the lessons learned from them. The biggest impact of reading these narratives is that through the personal accounts of these China experts, we gain an intimately human encounter with a changing China.

I believe that Murray, Link, and Pickowicz have done an impressive job editing this book. Their ability to weave together the various vignettes they have selected pulls back the “bamboo curtain” on China, providing students and scholars a window into the everyday life and culture of the people there. Even though this book is not a traditional methodological research book, it is fascinating to see history come alive through the personal accounts of China experts who have visited China, and whose shared experiences allow us to know more. This book is very enriching, as it discusses not only the retelling of their personal experiences of these China “trippings,” but also what was immediately learned from it. I strongly recommend this book, as it provides a greater understanding of China and its endlessly changing culture.

Murray, Jeremy A., Perry Link, and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds. *China Tripping: Encountering the Everyday in the People's Republic*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. 168 Pages. \$25.00 (Paperback).

Author Bio

Byron Williams is currently an undergraduate History major at CSUSB and will be graduating in spring 2019. His academic interests and areas of focus are in US History and Military History. As of late, he has also found studying American Politics to be very enriching. After graduating, he hopes to continue his education and work towards earning a Master's degree in History and, eventually, a PhD. His future goal is to eventually become a professor of history at the university level. He would like to thank Dr. Ryan Keating, Dr. Jeremy Murray, and Dr. Cherstin Lyon for their guidance over the years and making his college experience fun and rewarding.

